DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 104 SP 039 054

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TITLE An Organizational Grounded Theory on the Structure and Political Dynamics of the Student Teacher Placement Process. An Executive Summary.
PUB DATE 2000-02-00
NOTE 34p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) (Orlando, FL, February 13-16, 2000). Winner of the ATE Distinguished Dissertation in Teacher Education Award.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; Administrator Role; College School Cooperation; Cooperating Teachers; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; Higher Education; *Participative Decision Making; Preservice Teacher Education; Principals; *Student Placement; Student Teachers; *Student Teaching; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Grounded Theory

ABSTRACT

This study investigated how decisions were made in selecting elementary school cooperating teachers and subsequently placing student teachers from the perspectives of key university, school district, and school participants. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with university placement directors, school district officials, elementary principals, and elementary teacher leaders. Interviews examined university directors' perspectives on the process of selecting cooperating teachers, and investigated school district officials' criteria for selecting cooperating teachers and placing student teachers. Focus groups gathered the personal experiences of elementary principals. Each participant shared in the decision-making process regarding student teacher placement, but decisions were made via a series of small decisions. No participants were able to see the whole situation in systemic terms, but rather saw only their own role when their part of the process surfaced. One university placement director estimated that only 10 percent of placement decisions were made in a thoughtful manner. Principals could not describe objective, written criteria for selecting cooperating teachers. There was little or no coordination between the formal organizations of universities and school districts. (Contains 50 references.) (SM)

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ED 439 104

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2000 ATE Distinguished Dissertation in Teacher Education Award Winner

An Organizational Grounded Theory on the Structure and Political Dynamics of the Student Teacher Placement Process

An Executive Summary

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Orlando, Florida
February 13-16, 2000

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, teacher education programs have built increasing emphasis on field experiences throughout the undergraduate education. Student teaching remains the major field experience for a pre-service teacher, built on the beliefs that people learn to teach by teaching, that it is important to work under the direction and guidance of an experienced teacher, and that the best place for that experience is the "real" classroom. Although the literature is full of both empirical work and opinion pieces about the phenomenon of student teaching and the importance the cooperating teacher to a student teacher's immediate and long-term teaching success, almost all studies are based on the assumption that the current system works effectively.

In reality, any educator can relate instances in which the cooperating teacher was selected for reasons other than his or her teaching ability and situations in which the cooperating teacher/student teacher placement was anything but desirable. There are numerous examples of serious consequences of student teacher placement decisions when the decision was not carefully made. Stories, frequently related by word-of-mouth, occur over and over in schools throughout the country: a student teacher is placed in a cooperating teacher's classroom in the student teacher's neighborhood school where he has multiple personal connections; a teacher asks to serve as cooperating teacher for her best friend; a principal decides to place a student teacher with an instructionally incompetent teacher hoping the student teacher will motivate the cooperating teacher; a student teacher is placed with an administrative or counseling intern or coach who will be "freed up" with someone else to take the teaching load; a student teacher is assigned to a teacher who is experiencing health problems and may need to be on extended sick leave during the term. The list goes on. The literature would lead us to believe that such stories would be considered *anomalies*. However, anyone with experience in university teacher education programs or in public schools knows better.

Review of the Literature

Many research studies have concluded that the cooperating (or master teacher) has more impact on the student teacher than any one other person (Emans, 1983; Hoy & Rees, 1977; Karmos & Jacko, 1977; McIntyre, 1984). However, few studies have examined the critical nature of the selection of that cooperating teacher and the considerations that are important in the final placement. A review of the literature suggests the following criteria should be used in the selection of a master teacher: proven instructional abilities; years of experience; years of successful evaluations; current training and involvement in professional activities; supervisory experience or training; ability to communicate; and ability to develop a mentoring relationship (e.g., Copas, 1984; Emans, 1983; Gregory, 1971; Switzer, 1976).

Once a teacher has been selected to be a cooperating teacher, a decision is made to place a particular student teacher with that teacher. Is that decision made by the elementary principal? Does the decision-maker consider the qualifications of the cooperating teacher to determine a "fit" between the prospective student teacher and the cooperating teacher? In other words, is this a placement that will *best* serve the needs of the student teacher? Such questions have not been answered by empirical studies.

Equally enigmatic are issues such as those involving the organizations involved in placement decisions--the university department of education, the school district, and specific public schools. For example, who moderates placement decisions? Is this the role of the university? What is the responsibility of the school district? What "quality control" measures are expected or implied by the individual schools? These questions lead to insights which may be gained from organizational theory. Few studies have attempted to examine these phenomena at the level of the organization. A valid interpretation of the serious issues in placement "horror" stories may be derived by an analysis of the organizations involved--the department of teacher training at a university, a public school, a school district, and the organizational relationships among them. A reading of the literature on student teaching does not explain these situations. As I have studied theories of

organizations, I have found better explanations for some of these placement problems than mentioned in most of the literature on student teaching.

Organizational Theory as Applied to the Student Teacher Placement Process

The literature suggests that few studies have investigated student teacher placement as an organizational issue. Through several studies, Sudzina, Knowles, and Coolican, have examined the issue of failure in student teaching, and have concluded that one often overlooked factor in failure is what they term "contextual conditions" (e.g. the placement of the student teacher in a particular setting) (Knowles & Sudzina, 1994; Knowles & Sudzina, 1992; Sudzina & Coolican, 1994; Sudzina & Knowles, 1993). Their work on failure in student teaching as related to "contextual conditions" is the strongest evidence to date to suggest that placement factors may be so significant that some student teachers cannot overcome those conditions, even though they may otherwise be well prepared to teach.

Severn (1992) examined the decision-making process and concluded that "garbage-can decision-making" is the operational norm in the selection of cooperating teachers. She concludes that the process "supports the status quo through lack of program continuity between the university and the public schools, ambiguous goals, the lack of cooperating teacher selection criteria, inadequate in-service programs and recognition of the cooperating teacher role" (p. v-vi).

Structural Perspectives

Perrow (1970) defines the structural aspects of organizations as the roles people play; the relationships between groups of people in those roles (rather than the nature of the individual personalities); rules; the degree of centralization or decentralization; responsibilities; staff; functions of specific groups; and the administrative design. March and Simon (1958) include the division of labor and goals as part of an organization's structure.

Salaman (1980) examined organizational structures, noting:

> The concept organizational structure is used to refer to the observed patterned continuity in the behaviour and activities of organizational members over time. This regularity is, on the one hand, what is meant by organizational structure, but is also held to be the result of the ways in which events, activities, responsibilities, authorities, and so on are officially structured and controlled within and by the organization (p. 56).

In other words, the organizational structure may be imposed on the organization by its own members or it may emerge or evolve from the operations of an organization over time.

Organizational structural paradigms illuminate the issues involved in student teacher placement in several ways. One applicable paradigm is that of loose/tight coupling (Lutz & Lutz, 1988). Organizations can be described as "loosely-coupled" or "tightly coupled" based on their methods of operating and decision making (Weick, 1978; Meyer & Rowan, 1975). Typically school systems are considered to be loosely coupled organizations because the following characteristics are present: indeterminate goals; variable raw materials; little control over causation; large spans of control; a nd unclear technology (Lutz & Lutz, 1988). A tightly coupled organization, on the other hand, is organized around well-defined rules, agreement on those rules, a compliance system, and a feedback system to improve conditions (Weick, 1978; Meyer & Rowan, 1975).

Student teachers are caught between two complex organizations, both of which have predominately loosely coupled characteristics. According to Weick's (1978) model, schools have many goals they are expected to accomplish and the students (as the "raw materials" of educational organizations) are varied in their abilities and needs. Although colleges do have rules regarding student teaching, they have little ability to exert those rules on the public school system which they depend upon to serve as student teaching sites. The rules of the college apply only within their organization. The college may make it known what they expect in a student teaching placement with a cooperating teacher, but no direct system of compliance can be seen. In student teaching placement, two sets of administrators are involved: the college/university placement officer and the school principal or the school district's representative responsible for the selection of cooperating

teachers and placement decisions. Each sees how his/her own institutional needs may or may not be met by the student teacher placement decision.

Structurally, placement concerns also include goals, intended outcomes, roles, rules, communication, time, leadership, decision-making processes, internal/external environments, assessment of effectiveness, and accountability (Isaacson, 1994). In this list, outcomes seem to be the entire point of student teaching. Substantial research has demonstrated the critical nature of the impact of the student teaching placement on the "outcome" of teacher quality--a strong or weak teacher (e.g., Bennie, 1966; Blomenkamp, 1996; Conant, 1963; Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; Karmos & Jacko, 1977; Lortie, 1975; Tabachnick, 1980; Zeichner, 1980).

Political Perspectives

A political organizational view may illuminate the most visible nature of placement decisions through an examination of interests, power, control, dependencies, resources, the building of coalitions, and conflict. Whose interests are represented in the decision-making process of student teacher placement? A political perspective of organizations views authority and decision making as coming from a base of power. Some sources of power and influence in organizations consist of reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, expert (French & Raven, 1968). The building principal may hold any one or more of these as sources of power and influence. How a principal acts on his/her use of power may be viewed in student teacher placement decisions.

Bacharach and Mitchell (1987) maintain that educational organizations are political systems which are "composed of structurally interdependent interest groups and coalitions perpetually engaged in bargaining" (p. 409). A rational interdependence of groups is created by the structure of the organization. "The political component results from the differential interests and goals of the various groups" (p. 409).

Shedd and Bacharach (1991) examine the shortage of resources in schools as a contributing political constraint in the job of teaching, particularly the resource of time.

They maintain that most teachers believe they have far less time to counsel students, to plan and prepare lessons, and even far less time to instruct students than they need. If teachers and their administrators look at a prospective student teacher as another set of hands--an additional person which will add time available for the instruction of students--then the student teacher could be seen as an additional resource.

Based on these organizational perspectives, the selection of cooperating teachers and subsequent assignment of student teachers may take on new meanings.

Method

The purpose of this study was to describe how decisions are made regarding the selection of cooperating teachers in elementary schools and subsequent placement of student teachers from perspectives of key university, school district, and school participants. Two goals of this research are to provide a beginning to an organizational theory of student teaching placement so that the experience can be as potentially successful for the student teacher as possible, and to provide theoretical basis for further study.

In pursuit of these purposes, the research questions were:

1. How do university placement directors describe the selection of cooperating teachers and the placement of student teachers?
2. How do school district officials describe the selection of cooperating teachers and the placement of student teachers?
3. How do elementary principals describe the selection of cooperating teachers and the placement of student teachers?
4. How do teacher leaders in elementary schools describe the selection of cooperating teachers and the placement of student teachers?
5. How does organizational theory interpret these decisions and processes from structural and political perspectives?
6. What theoretical propositions would provide a grounded theory of the structural and political organizational dynamics of the student teaching placement?

Grounded Theory

Qualitative methodology provides the opportunity to acquire "thick descriptions" and build a base of data founded on human experiences (Babbie, 1992; Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The form of qualitative research selected for this study is

grounded theory which "uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data are systematically coded into themes from which the researcher can begin to see patterns and relationships; "the pattern that emerges is sometimes called 'grounded theory'" (Rudestam & Newton, 1992).

Creswell (1998) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that grounded theory may be presented in the form of a visual model--a coding diagram or conditional matrix. Glaser and Strauss suggest the forms of "a well-codified set of propositions or. . . a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties" (1967, p. 31). Taylor (1986) suggests presenting theoretical hypotheses as "discoveries".

For this study, I have utilized a hybrid model, combining Glaser and Strauss' (1967) running theoretical discussion with hypotheses presented as "discoveries" (Taylor, 1986). Glaser and Strauss prefer the theoretical discussion form for several reasons:

> [The] strategy of comparative analysis for generating theory puts a high emphasis on *theory as process;* that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product. . . . it is written with the assumption that it is still developing. . . . The discussional form of formulating theory gives a feeling of "ever-developing" to the theory, allows it to become quite rich, complex, and dense, and makes its fit and relevance easy to comprehend. On the other hand, to state a theory in propositional form, except perhaps for a few scattered core propositions, would make it less complex, dense, and rich, and more laborious to read. It would also tend by implication to "freeze" the theory instead of giving the feeling of a need for continued development. [emphasis in original] (p. 32)

I prefer Taylor's use of "discoveries" to present hypotheses because they were, indeed, *discovered* as I collected, coded, and analyzed the data. To speak of discoveries also represents the ongoing organic process of generating theory from data, collecting more data through another research study, performing more comparative analyses, and reformulating theory to provide direction for future research.

Data Collection

Four sources of data provided information addressing the research questions: university placement directors (UPDs), school district officials (SDOs), elementary principals, and teacher leaders from elementary schools. Data were collected through two processes: interviews and focus groups. The interview technique was used to obtain perspectives of three university placement directors and persons designated by the school districts to be liaisons for student teacher placements. Interviews of university directors consisted of several predetermined questions pertaining to the process of placement that elucidated the directors' perspective of the process of the selection of cooperating teachers from their institution.

A second process consisted of phone interviews to SDOs in the school districts mentioned by the placement directors. Each of these interviews involved several questions pertaining to the criteria and persons involved in the selection of cooperating teachers and the process for placement of student teachers within their districts.

Focus groups (also a form of interviews) were used to gather personal experiences of 14 elementary principals identified by the placement directors. Data were collected from focus groups of 11 elementary teachers identified by elementary principals as leaders in their buildings. Focus groups are a focused interview technique that involves a group of subjects at one time. Krueger (1994) describes a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive nonthreatening environment" (p. 6). Focus groups are described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) as "group interviews that are structured a particular way and have specific, well-defined goals. . . . A topic is introduced and participants are encouraged to comment on it in turn and then as part of a dynamic group dialogue" (p. 100).

Delimitations

This study is qualitative in nature; therefore the informants were closely involved with the process of selecting cooperating teachers. The limitations of the study are that the

findings are limited by the experiences of the subjects interviewed. Additionally, the subjects are geographically from the same area of the United States. This study is also limited to the placement of student teachers in elementary schools by focusing on the perceptions of elementary principals and elementary teachers.

In order to establish the trustworthiness of this study, I have used a number of recognized techniques: triangulation of data, member checking, and "thick descriptions." The outcomes of this study may or may not be transferable to other universities, school districts, or other areas of the country.

Discoveries

A presentation of grounded theory must rest on conceptual categories and properties which exists in the study's data. The conceptual categories and properties utilized in this study were constructed based on structural and political organizational theories. In the structural organizational category, the properties pertain to organizational goals, rules and criteria, decision-making procedures, etc.; the political category contains properties such as individual interests, the use of power, competition over scarce resources, and conflict. However, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) allege, sometimes "borrowed categories" do not emerge as cleanly as they do when originally applied in other disciplines. Such was indeed the case here. I had difficulty separating the structural from the political implications of the participants' descriptions; in these cases, the overlapping properties are discussed together. In this section, my discoveries are presented in italicized form, followed by a discussion based upon the study's findings and the conceptual categories and properties derived from these data.

Discovery #1: The Student Teaching Placement Decision-Making Process

Discovery: The student teacher placement process can best be described as a series of small decisions, with each step under the control of different decision makers.

The assumption guiding the foundation of this study, and of much of the research on student teaching, is that there is one key individual who controls the student teacher-cooperating teacher placement decision. Several of the questions asked in both individual and focus group interviews attempted to ascertain who that one person really was. The data provided ample reason to disregard this assumption: there is not one decision and one decision maker in the process, but many.

Pfeffer (1981) maintains that all organizational decisions are, in reality, combinations of several smaller decisions made in a sequential manner. Further, it is possible for "a social actor within the organization to have power because of his or her ability to affect some part of the decision process" (p. 115). This, indeed, seems to be the case in the student teaching placement process.

In the data, all of the SDOs, and all except one of the principals agreed with this literature which states that the one person who holds most of the discretion in the selection of cooperating teachers is the building principal. All participants agreed that the decision process was also randomly decided, by asking for volunteers and then "taking whoever signed up." One principal expressed her belief that good pairing had as much to do with good luck as with any amount of attempts to correctly partner up a cooperating teacher with a student teacher. Principals named themselves as holding final responsibility in selection of cooperating teachers, and a few acknowledged that the cooperating teacher shares in the final responsibility. Two of the three UPDs and almost all of the teachers, on the other hand, believed that the cooperating teacher controls the final decision. Teachers describe the selection process as ultimately being based on the question, "Who wants a student teacher?" rather than on any rational selection process based on objective criteria or upon the decision of one individual. Many participants articulated methods by which they themselves or others exerted influence over some aspect of the decision-making process.

Only two teachers were adamant that principals should do more to screen cooperating teachers. The process thus emerges as a series of smaller decisions, each controlled by a different decision maker. The university makes decisions during a student's progression through a preservice education program; those who arrive at the student teaching stage emerge from many decisions made by university faculty about their knowledge and skills. The university then turns over the placement details to a school district.

Discovery #2: The Limits of Rationality

Discovery: As long as the organizations of the public school and the university and links between them remain extremely loosely coupled, it will be difficult--if not impossible--to select cooperating teachers and to place specific student teachers based on substantive, rational criteria.

The literature reviewed found little agreed-upon criteria for cooperating teachers, and what little were mentioned are not followed (Brodbelt, 1980). Any criteria actually used appear unrelated to the goals of the teacher education program and are pragmatic in nature rather than clinical (Copas, 1984); in other words, the selection of cooperating teachers serves the purposes of efficiency or political gains rather than the highest levels of instructional quality (Connor, Killmer, McKay, & Whigham, 1993). The selection of a cooperating teacher is based only upon an assumption that a cooperating teacher will turn out to be "good" (Becher & Ade, 1982).

Even though the student teacher placement decision is, in reality, a series of smaller decisions, a commonsense assumption is that each decision maker in the process uses a rational, objective process to guide his or her efforts. This was not the case. In the current study, one teacher leader described observing student teachers who had progressive undergraduate training but were placed with very traditional cooperating teachers. Her example confirms findings in the literature that student teacher placements may be unrelated to the goals of the teacher education program. Another teacher described a colleague that,

as a cooperating teacher, was able to "destroy" a student teacher, and other teachers could also describe equally destructive placements that were used over and over.

Principals were unable to describe objective, written criteria for the selection of cooperating teachers from their schools. In fact, one principal felt luck was a factor in good placements, and another admitted, "We don't spend a whole lot of time [on the selection and placement]". Principals seemed reluctant to acknowledge or to discuss any method of screening that may be used to select cooperating teachers.

In this study, UPDs indicated that cooperating teachers should have knowledge of adult learning and an understanding of the mentoring process; however, interviews with three UPDs were consistent with the literature that few requirements were in place for cooperating teachers nor did cooperating teachers need to have special training. Only one SDO felt that cooperating teachers should have any special training; she suggested that all cooperating teachers should have training on effective instruction and assessment, as well as information about developmental levels of beginning teachers.

Teachers were more concerned that they have the opportunity to be involved in the selection of their "own" student teachers, than that any screening criteria should apply to themselves as cooperating teachers. Most of the teachers in the focus groups appeared reluctant to agree that principals should screen out certain teachers as potential cooperating teachers. Only two teachers expressed strong convictions that principals should be very selective about cooperating teachers.

According to the literature, even if a university has concerns regarding the qualifications of a cooperating teacher, dependency upon the schools makes it difficult to surface such concerns. The university risks antagonizing a public school by calling anyone's competence or fitness into questions (Brodbelt, 1980). UPDs described instances in which they had to find informal ways to avoid placing student teachers with cooperating teachers about whom they had concerns. One UPD described a teacher who had been destructive to student teachers four times, but he is still unable to address the

issue with the building principal; he cannot afford to alienate the principal because the school serves as a placement site for several student teachers each year.

Many universities contact numerous school districts to place large numbers of student teachers several times during a school year. Some school districts have a school district official (SDO) who may or may not have a well-defined system of selecting cooperating teachers and placing student teachers. Because of the repetition of placing many student teachers, the process in the three districts represented in this study appear to be routine. Routinized decisions call forth a "performance program almost instantaneously. . . developed and learned at some previous time. . . (March & Simon, 1958, p. 137). The selection process for cooperating teachers and the placement of student teachers are only a few of thousands of decisions made in a school; such decisions have no doubt been made consistently with the current process for many years. In fact, one SDO turned the entire placement process over to her secretary. Another SDO reported that her school district was considering making the same delegation decision. These decisions appear to be based on "satisficing" rather than optimizing, as described by March and Simon (1958). One principal acknowledged, "Most generally we go with whoever wants to [supervise a student teacher]. . . ". Another principal admitted, "Most people say, 'How many do you have? Okay, I can find some [cooperating teachers]. I've got five names here, put them in.' We don't spend a whole lot of time".

Severn contends that decisions regarding the selection of cooperating teachers "supports the status quo through lack of program continuity between the university and the public schools, ambiguous goals, the lack of cooperating teacher selection criteria, inadequate in-service programs and recognition of the cooperating teacher role" (p. v-vi). Now, because there is almost no communication back and forth about the teacher training program, no in-service about the type of cooperating teacher that principals need to be selecting, and no rationale behind the selection connected to program, principals select cooperating teachers based on their own rationale which often supports the status quo since

the status quo is working--student teachers are getting credentialed to teach. It's a mind set of "why fix what isn't broken?" (Severn, 1992, p. 206)

The findings of the current study would support Severn's conclusion. The routinized decision-making process for student teacher placement is so seldom questioned, its overall priority in a school's agenda so low, and decision makers are so overloaded, that the current "program" of decision-making for this issue is ubiquitously repeated.

Discovery #3: Resource Dependency

Discovery: Until and unless universities have more resources in their interorganizational relationships with public schools, and/or with individual educators, universities will continue to be in positions of resource-dependency in regard to both.

Universities are so dependent upon schools for placement sites, they are unwilling and less able to antagonize those school relations by demanding or requiring high standards in those selected to be cooperating teachers. The three universities in this study need placements for several hundred students teachers each year, placing high demands upon a limited number of elementary schools in the area. One principal commented that universities "come begging" to the schools for placement sites, corroborating Aldrich and Pfeffer's (1976) description of a "resource dependence" situation. Teachers and principals report that many teachers do not want to supervise student teachers for a variety of reasons, which further limits the number of classrooms available.

Time as a resource was an issue with all participants. The work of Darling-Hammond documents that teachers, in general, have too little time and too heavy workloads (1997). The UPDs expressed concern about the time it takes to handle the placement process from the university side of the arrangement and how their institutions allotted inadequate time to shepherd placements and to work on improving the process.

Principals have full loads as building administrators and instructional leaders. Yet they are asked or expected by the teachers, the university placement directors, the university supervisors, the student teachers, and the school district official (as well as their

own expectations of themselves) to demonstrate leadership with student teachers by such activities as: interviewing prospective student teachers; holding a pre-placement meeting with student teachers and cooperating teachers; orienting student teachers to their schools; holding seminars with their student teachers; observing and evaluating student teachers' instructional skills; and providing exit interviews.

An individual teacher's scarce resource of time is depleted substantially when, accurately, he or she must take on the supervision and mentoring of a neophyte professional. In addition, recent state and district reform efforts are causing an increased workload and stress for teachers which, in turn, causes many more teachers to decline the invitation to take on additional time-expensive tasks. These concerns address the organizational dependence of the university upon the schools. However, within the schools, the university is additionally dependent upon individual teachers.

The reality is that, "done correctly," the hosting of student teachers places additional demands upon school district officials, principals, and teachers. A student teacher draws upon educators' time, patience, and coaching abilities, even in the best of situations. If a student teacher is mediocre or has many problems, additional work required in supervision makes even heavier withdrawals from the bank of human resources. In this entire relationship, the university essentially is not in the position to offer any compensatory resource back to individuals or school organizations as part of a reciprocal transaction; the process, instead, seems to hinge on the personal relationships between specific university placement and supervisory staff and individuals with decision-making influence within the student teacher placement process. The university's influence is also based, in part, upon the professional value of "giving back to one's profession," a value that the university is certain to continue to inculcate into each generation of its students.

Discovery #4: Student Teachers as Resources

<u>Discovery</u>: In those situations where student teachers are perceived as "slack resources," a school will more readily accept student teacher placements. However, in

these situations, the student teacher's professional learning becomes subsumed under the need to achieve the school's goals at all costs.

Viewing a student teacher as a drain on a school's and individuals' resources is only one way the situation can be perceived. An equally valid theoretical perspective generated from participants' words frames a student teacher as an *additional resource* within a classroom and a school. The organizational literature describes this relationship as that of *slack resources*. Slack resources, according to Pfeffer (1981), are "resources which, at a given point in time, are in excess of what has already been committed and promised to other organizational participants in order to maintain their participation in the organization" (p. 103).

Schools operate in an increasingly resource-scarce environment. Educators maintain that more demands are being placed on the curriculum, on teacher accountability, and on student outcomes and assessment, while increasing numbers of high needs students are enrolled in schools. If teachers and their administrators look at a prospective student teacher as another set of hands--an additional person which will add time available for the instruction of students--then the student teacher could be seen as an additional resource.

UPDs acknowledged that principals request student teachers to help provide an "extra pair of hands" or to allow cooperating teachers to take on other duties around the school. Teachers, principals, UPDs, and SDOs named instances in which a principal or a teacher asks for a student teacher for a teacher who is a principal designee, a coach, or in charge of an extracurricular activity. Principals and teachers acknowledged student teachers were a resource for their schools and for individual teachers.

When decisions are made regarding student teacher placement, many may see the prospective student teacher as an additional resource to be doled out to an overworked teacher or as a resource to substitute for the teacher, who is then "released" from a classroom to accomplish other tasks on behalf of the school. In such cases, principals do not assume that a student teacher can simply be placed with anyone who volunteers; rather,

more careful screening and consideration of both student teachers and cooperating teachers occurs in order to prevent placement problems that will take their time and thereby drain resources rather than contribute in the form of additional (slack) resources.

This discovery of the student teacher as a slack organizational resource holds tremendous possibilities for universities that are interested in decreasing their dependency upon the whims of the public schools. The idea also becomes a potentially valuable competitive edge in the placement and improvement of the experiences of student teachers.

Discovery #5: Goal Diversity and Decision Making

Discovery: As long as the public school organization and the university see themselves as possessing different goals, student teacher placement decisions will assume a routinized form.

The goal of the teacher training component of a university is to produce qualified and certified teachers for K-12 schools. The student teaching experience has been determined to be a critical element in the training process, the time in which the student teacher applies the theories and strategies learned in the university classes to the real world of the school classroom. The goal and outcomes of public schools (K-12) are educated students. Traditionally, the goal of schools has not been to prepare future teachers.

Participants in the current study appeared to frame student teaching as a requirement to spend a certain amount of time in a classroom of students as the last step in obtaining a teaching certificate. Once hired, the "real" learning is expected to take place in the first year of teaching; this thinking may be inferred in the relatively small amount of time principals spend on selecting of cooperating teachers and working with student teachers, and on the casual nature of teacher leaders' opinions regarding norms of equity among those who volunteer to be cooperating teachers. Indeed, the process of placing student teachers seems governed by a routinized decision-making process which seeks to place student teachers with "good enough" cooperating teachers, rather than "the best" cooperating teachers.

The routinization of the student teacher placement decision processes focuses far more on what the university needs (numbers of placement sites) and what schools need (additional resources) than over the common welfare of both organizations or of the individual student teacher. The immediacy of this placement "work" is allowed to be a deciding force, rather than attention to the longer-term implications of the current process.

Discovery #6: Loose Coupling and Communication

Discovery: Communication among those affected by the student teaching placement process will continue to be problematic as long as the organizations involved remain loosely coupled regarding the purposes of student teaching.

Organizations can be described as "loosely coupled" or "tightly coupled" based upon how "tightly" their structural elements are linked to each other. Generally "tight coupling" refers to more centralized organizations with more centralized decision making and close coordination of parts. Research has determined that both universities and public schools are loosely coupled organizations (Lutz & Lutz, 1988; Weick, 1978; Meyer & Rowan, 1975). A public school also operates in a loosely coupled environment, and has little control over the "raw material" (i.e., student teachers) that it is asked to place with cooperating teachers (Weick, 1978). Universities are considered loosely coupled because the following characteristics are present: variable raw materials, little control over causation, large spans of control, and unclear technology (Lutz & Lutz, 1988). Principals and teachers in the current study reported their expectations that universities should do a better job screening prospective student teachers, indicating that some minimal standard be used to "weed out" the weakest students.

Weick (1978) contends, "Loose coupling also carries connotations of impermanence, dissolvability, and tacitness, all of which are potentially crucial properties of the 'glue' that holds organizations together" (p. 18). The relationship between the university and the school is usually of short duration, existing for the term (quarter, semester) of the student teaching experience. The school site and the individual classroom

may or may not be used again in the near or even distant future. However, principals and teachers report hosting student teachers from several universities and in varying numbers from year to year. Frequent reference was made to the growing practice by universities to develop long-term relationships with certain schools by placing students there for early field experiences, continuing through student teaching. Such practices may, over time, increase the linkages between the two organizations, and thereby strengthen coordination and accomplishment of goals.

A loosely coupled system is "relatively inexpensive to run because it takes time and money to coordinate people" (Weick, 1978, p. 24). However, such a situation "it is less open to controls, less specific in decision making, and less capable of change" (p. 24). Little coordination occurs within the school system regarding student teacher placement. SDOs have an important, albeit tacit, role in but this responsibility is only one of many they are expected to accomplish, and is relatively low on the district priority list. The SDO of one major district delegates the placement process to her secretary, saying that the secretary does all the placements, and inferring that the process is merely clerical and not worth of the time by a certificated administrator. UPDs have relatively little control over school placements, but are the only individuals who are paid entirely for achieving these goals. Principals also have a large responsibility in selection of cooperating teachers and placing of student teachers (and potentially supervising student teachers). The cooperating teachers maintain the day-to-day supervision and on-the-job-training of the student teacher. The university provides a supervisor (usually an adjunct) to supervise several student teachers once a week. All are paid a "pittance" in financial terms, and yet student teachers pay full tuition for a full-credit load to their universities during the student teaching term. In this case, the loosely-coupled university process is, indeed, "inexpensive to run."

Because little coupling exists between the university and the public school, no one person is overseeing the quality of each placement decision, and no one person can change the methods being used. Of course, the UPDs are formally charged with this task;

however, sheer numbers prevent the task's accomplishment. Most universities place their student teachers in numerous local or regional school districts, and substantial variation exists among districts in centralized coordination of the selection of cooperating teachers. Districts perceive different degrees of importance of the decisions regarding selection and placement of student teachers on the part of the principal.

The concept of loose coupling, as described by Wiles and Brooks (1978), portrays the typical teacher education program as "tragically isolated" from the student teaching experience (p. 76). The university is a "stranger" in the public school, and the classroom/cooperating teacher has little role to play in the program of the university (Wiles & Brooks, 1978, p. 76). "Without standardized goals, objectives, or procedures, there was no logical communication point between the university coursework and the school-based teacher education experiences" (p. 76). The volunteering process is only loosely coupled to its outcomes. The university wants to assume that the school district uses some sort of system to evaluate worthiness of cooperating teachers to supervise student teachers, and the school wants to assume that the university screens student teachers, their university supervisors, and the faculty who instruct preservice teachers in those knowledge and skill bases necessary to teaching children.

Student teachers are caught between two complex organizations, both of which have predominantly loosely coupled characteristics. Colleges have very little ability to exert their rules upon the public school system which they depend upon to host field experiences and student teaching experiences. The rules of the college apply only within that organization. The college may make it known what is expected in a student teaching placement with a cooperating teacher, but does not have the authority to monitor compliance. It is difficult for a college to give direct negative feedback to a public school without paying heavily in political costs, and in the refusal to host future student teachers. Only when a shortage of student teachers occurs, is there likely to be a change in the placement process.

The universities and the school districts participating in this study considered there to be "good communication" between the organizations. Parties from both genuinely want student teachers to have positive experiences. However, universities have little information about those individuals who serve as cooperating teachers. Cooperating teachers are not required to fill out any informational forms.

The cooperating teacher may receive more information about the student teacher than the other way around. Universities ask student teachers to submit a packet which includes a letter of application, an informal transcript of grades, and perhaps, a resume. Cooperating teachers in some schools are urged to set up a pre-student teaching interview; other teachers are not aware that interviews are an option. The pre-student teaching interview allows the cooperating teacher to make some initial judgment regarding the suitability of the student teacher for a particular classroom. Cooperating teachers hold the greater advantage in the communication of information with which to make a decision. Teachers and principals reported few instances in which the cooperating teacher actually rejected a student teacher based on the interview. It is unlikely that student teachers hold enough power to ask for a different placement based on the interview with the prospective cooperating teacher.

There is little or no coordination between the formal organizations of universities and school districts, other than legal agreements specifying that student teachers will be placed in school sites. Universities provide a handbook for cooperating teachers; this handbook is the primary means of communication of the responsibilities of the cooperating teacher; however, there is no means of assurance that teachers read or follow the handbook. Otherwise, the universities rely on the university supervisor to provid all interorganizational communication.

Discovery #7: Tight Coupling and Problems

Discovery: The coupling between the university and the public school will tighten significantly any time a problem or an irregularity occurs in the student teaching placement process

UPDs clearly articulated the attributes they believed needed to be characteristic of strong, effective cooperating teachers. In describing "worst case scenarios," one UPD commented that most of the unsuccessful placements come about through problems with misunderstandings and miscommunication. The other two UPDs admitted that perhaps half of all problematic placements are contextual in nature with the initiating concerns raised by the student teacher or the university supervisor and concern issues in the organization of a classroom, the nature of a specific school, or philosophical differences between a cooperating teacher and a student teacher.

The SDOs seemed less likely to know of specific examples of either exemplary or dreadful placements. Some focus group teachers offered examples in which the cooperating teacher was ineffective. One teacher observed that too often, poor teachers were allowed to supervise student teachers. However, in general, teacher leader participants more readily described problem placements as a result of attributes of the student teacher rather than ineffectiveness on the part of their colleagues. Principals related examples of problems by telling stories, usually about one of two types: problems emanating from the personality or training of the student teacher, or problems with the cooperating teacher that interfered with her or his abilities to be effective in the role.

At no time during the descriptions of the placement process did anyone mention strict adherence to written rules and criteria; only when potential problems occur did this "tightening" of behavior to policy have meaning. In organizational terms, the situation is said to become much more tightly coupled when problems surface in a placement. Principals and teachers give little credibility to the university supervisor or the UPD until a student teacher begins to experience difficulty. Then the school expects to make a quick contact with the university, and they expect the university supervisor to deal with the

problems. During "normal times," the university's contact is less noticed, less visible, and, perhaps, even less welcome. When knowledge of a significant issue exists, the school's first response is usually to contact the university supervisor or the UPD. Principals and teachers expect the university to become very involved with the school and cooperating teacher in working through the problem whether it involves conferencing, placing the student teacher in another school, or, in the extreme, counseling the student teacher out of the profession. One principal observed that in serious student teaching problems, "the university all of a sudden becomes equal partners [with the school]" , perhaps suggesting that they are not ordinarily viewed as "equal partners" by public schools as long as a situation appears to be working smoothly.

Lutz and Lutz (1988) conclude that the "individuals most vulnerable to the failures of the loosely coupled organization are the least powerful individuals, ones who count on the rules of the bureaucracy to protect and assist them" (p. 42)--the student teacher caught in a difficult placement situation. One teacher shared her concern that student teachers were in that very delicate position of having only, at best, the university supervisor to turn to if things are not going well in their placement.

Discovery #8: The Role of Individuals

Discovery: The fact that the student teacher placement process is at all effective is more due to individual factors rather than facilitative organizational conditions.

Because of the loosely coupled nature of both universities and public school organizations, an examination of the "published" structural elements of goals, rules, policies, criteria, decision-making procedures, coordination/integration processes, etc. is not particularly helpful to understanding how the student teacher placement process really works. In effect, two realities exist: the official, "published," organizationally legitimate, discussible reality, and a second, less discussed reality which more accurately describes how things get done within universities and public schools. One UPD expressed it well: "As far as criteria for cooperating teachers, there's the ideal and the real" . Almost all

public school participants in this study could describe the qualities of an ideal cooperating teacher and the "published" descriptions of how student teachers were placed with these individuals; in most cases, those descriptions corroborated the literature reviewed. However, participants also described placements in which cooperating teachers did not hold those qualifications; told stories about poor cooperating teachers repeatedly received student teachers; and referred to situations in which standard operating procedures were either overtly or covertly ignored. Some principals and SDOs and report making individual (and surreptitious) moves to intercept the system and place their veto on a volunteer deemed to be a poor cooperating teacher.

From the universities' perspectives, UPDs articulated the need screening prospective cooperating teachers to assure their meeting specified criteria; however, they admit no system is in place to do so. They have no formal evaluation instrument to evaluate a prospective cooperating teacher in advance, or for that matter, after the fact. One UPD acknowledged that he is often forced to "go to the second choice of cooperating teacher of [whoever] they can" . He observed that thoughtful student teacher placements accounted for only about 10% of the placement he sees.

On the other hand, the data also indicate that a "successful placement" is judged by the standard of not causing the system any problems. Little wonder, then, as Severn (1992) contends, that the entire process seems tied to preservation of the status quo in both university and public school organizations. Indeed, few of this study's participants were able to offer substantive suggestions for improving the situation. Interestingly, when minor adjustments to the process were mentioned, they were usually intended for the *other* organization.

Recommendations for more work "in the field" were articulated, meaning that student teachers should spend more time in public school classrooms, where "the real learning" occurs. Almost all the teachers' suggestions for changing the student teacher process were also directed at the universities and ranged from suggestions about

lengthening the student teaching term, placing the student teacher in the same classroom for several terms, and assuring that the cooperating teacher interviews the prospective student teacher.

The overall impression from each of the levels of participants underscores the fact that each individual, as a part of the student teacher placement process, cannot see the situation in systemic terms. All appear to see only themselves as doing the best possible when their part of the process surfaces. The decisions made which create the student teaching placement are individualistic and particularistic. Small wonder that political forces--based on personal interests--are so rampant! However, the loosely coupled nature of the student teacher placement process guarantees that the process only works at all because individuals take it upon themselves to make it work.

Recommendations

The data from this study and the review of the literature, point to the need for systemic reforms--new ways of viewing student teaching. In this study, each participant shared a piece of the decision-making process regarding student teacher placement, but none could see the whole situation in systemic terms. All appeared to see only their own role when their part of the process surfaced. One UPD estimated that only 10% of the placement decisions are made in a thoughtful manner. Both the UPDs in this research and the literature describe placement sites that are very disparate in the seriousness with which they view the endeavor, disparate in the quality of student teachers' instruction and supervision, and geographically challenging for university supervisors to monitor adequately. Additionally, universities always seem to be scrambling to find placement sites because schools have no continuity of commitment to serving as training centers. The lack of continuity, lack of common commitment, and lack of goals are also apparent in the schools' criticisms of poor communication with universities.

Severn (1992) contends that the current process supports the status quo, constraining reform and innovation in schools. Rather than supporting the status quo,

universities need to examine new ways of operating. Universities and schools need to begin working together to improve the experience of student teachers. The following recommendations are based on systemic change which establishes decision making as a maximizing activity and problem-solving search for alternatives. These recommendations spring from an examination of the structural and political elements present in the student teacher placement process.

As do other authors, I recommend the formation of *deep* partnerships between universities and a few public schools. Often called *Professional Practice Partnerships* (Goodlad, 1984; Goodlad, 1990), these deep relationships attempt to build coordination and common goals among the organizations involved. Such deep partnerships could impact the loosely-coupled nature of the university, the schools, and the relationships among them.

The university is a "stranger" in the public school, and the classroom/cooperating teacher has little role to play in the program of the university (Wiles & Brooks, 1978, p. 76). This study *does not* recommend simply attempting to tighten the coupling by way of *more* rules and *more* compliance mechanisms. Rather, a deep partnership begins with a long-range plan and a contract among the participants. Each of the participants--universities, school districts, principals, teachers, and student teachers--has responsibilities and contributions, and each of the participants enjoys short-term and long-term benefits. Professional Practice Partnerships should forge relationships based on cohesion of goals, mutual contribution of resources, increased communication, and coordination of activities.

The relationships between the university and the school as described in this study are usually of short duration existing for one term (quarter, semester) of the student teaching experience. In Professional Practice Partnerships, universities would provide resources to a school in exchange for a long-term arrangement of acceptable placements. I recommend that as a part of Professional Practice Partnerships, principals, teachers, and university faculty of education (including university supervisors) would participate in a

series of seminars on beginning teacher development, instruction and assessment, supervision, mentoring, and communication skills. The participants should be considered equals during the seminars to reduce coalitions and turf issues. Once trained, the university would grant status to the school (Professional Practice School--PPS) and the district (Professional Practice District), and Professional Practice Certification and university adjunct rank to the principal and teachers. Only teachers and principals with such designations would be eligible for supervising student teachers.

In a PPS, the principal would be assisted in those expectations by the contributions of a university faculty supervisor. These two individuals should be seen in a partnership of overall supervision of the Partnership Program. Currently, school districts do not recognize a principal's participation in the preparation of student teachers. School districts should recognize the value of Professional Practice Principals by acknowledging those duties as part of their job description and evaluation. In the systemic change to Professional Practice Partnerships, districts would view the principal as a key to educational improvement through the resources made available by his or her role in the student teacher program. In turn, these principals should receive higher stipends from the college in recognition of their value in supervision and training student teachers, and they should be used to teach or co-teach graduate classes on the university campus, and additionally compensated financially.

In the current study, as well as throughout the literature, universities are resource dependent on schools for placement sites; a change to Professional Practice Partnerships, the playing field would be leveled. Universities would offer resources to the school by having students placed there for earlier field work and continuing through student teaching. The student teacher as a "slack organizational resource" holds tremendous possibilities for universities that are interested in decreasing their dependency upon the whims of the public schools. If teachers and their administrators look at a prospective student teacher as another set of hands--an additional person available for the instruction of students--then the

student teacher is seen as an additional resource. The idea also becomes a potentially valuable competitive edge in the placement and improvement of the experiences of student teachers.

Universities could also gain influence in the partnership by providing schools with additional help in numerous ways. University students in many other departments (such as music, art, physical education, nursing, speech therapy, English and other languages, math and sciences) would benefit from access to field sites and the school would benefit from their involvement. Teachers and principals in the Professional Practice Schools should have access to university classes (tuition credit) fitness facilities, university cultural events, and library privileges (which could extend to spouse and children). The form of this provision of resources could vary significantly from one university to another and from one school to another, tailored to the unique resources available and the unique needs of the school. A system-wide outpouring of resources offered by the university to the school would be based on joint planning. The significance is that the university would now be seen as having resources to offer schools; in other words, universities become a sought-after resource rather than seen as "coming begging for placements" and a drain on the school's resources. Schools operate in an increasingly resource-scarce environment. Educators maintain that more demands are being placed on the curriculum, on teacher accountability, and on student outcomes and assessment, while increasing numbers of high-needs students are enrolling in schools. This resource provision model would also make a university more competitive in terms of access to on-going, quality placement sites.

I would also recommend assigning one university supervisor to one Professional Practice School with a cadre of ten or more student teachers and ten or more pre-student teacher field experience students. The university supervisor would hold a full-time, continuing contract position, with full faculty recognition (with tenure-track and rank). Schools would provide the university supervisor office space or a conferencing room in recognition of the individual's importance in the school. University supervisors would be

in the school two or three days each week. During that time, the university supervisor would be available to student teachers, cooperating teachers, field service "interns," and school staff, and may provide additional services to the school via seminars or assistance with parent open houses. In other words, the coordination and integration would tighten as the university supervisor becomes an integral part of the school. Universities should recognize the position with prestige and a full-time contract instead of considering it an adjunct position for a retired administrator or teacher. Further, as the relationship is built, school faculty would have some evaluative process to provide feedback regarding the university supervisor's skills and activities, providing faculty with real ownership in the partnership. Teachers who received training and Professional Practice Teacher status should be recognized with increased stipends. Professional Practice Teachers would also be granted adjunct status from the university; they could then be hired to teach or to co-teach university classes. Practitioners have a valuable role to play in such courses as curriculum, methods, assessment, etc. This practice would also address the on-going complaint that universities are out of touch with current needs and practices in schools. Supporting Professional Practice Principals, Teachers, and Schools would be a wise use of school district resources, both for the short-term gain, and the long-term improvement of education.

If systemic change reformed the placement process to form Professional Practice Partnerships, it could be expected that as coordination of the two organizations increase, communication would improve, quality control would become more predictable, and time-consuming (and emotionally draining) "worse-case" placements would decrease. Systemic change in the selection of cooperating teachers and the placement of student teachers is necessary to improve the training of teachers. Only with a complete revision of the coordination of universities and public schools and a change in the current paradigms will move teacher education toward improvement of teacher training. The status quo must not continue.

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